Language, Politics and the Nation-State

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The "nation-state" is the concept of a continuous expanse of territory occupied in the majority by the people that has traditionally inhabited it, and governed autonomously by them. This people is assumed to be ethnically and culturally unified, with the principal cultural manifestations of their unity being shared religion and language.

In mainstream political thought for a period starting in the first decade of the 19th century and continuing to the early years of the 21st, the nation-state was taken to be an entity grounded in natural justice and rights, representing the best path to the peaceful coexistence of peoples. This ideology arose with the German Romantics, in opposition to Napoleon's ambitions within Europe, ambitions connected with the ongoing struggle of the European powers to amass overseas empires greater than one another's (see Joseph, 2006a).

Since then, it has been usual to think of the nation as something natural and organic, while the state, insofar as it is not coterminous with the nation, is artificial and arbitrary. In recent work on the ethics of identity, however, Appiah (2005, p. 244) argues that "if anything is arbitrary, it is not the state but the nation." Nations matter because of how individuals feel about them, based on shared experiences, especially of texts of various kinds. "States, on the other hand, have intrinsic moral value … because they regulate our lives through forms of coercion that will always require moral justification" (p. 245). This is particularly so in the wake of the 20th-century legacy of states undertaking "ethnic cleansing" through genocide, in order to turn the nation-state ideology into a reality on the ground, when the rise of minorities were perceived as a threat to it.

While Appiah's point about nations being arbitrary is well taken, the fact is that states are rescued from total arbitrariness only through texts, myths, and narratives connecting them to national identity. This can be a matter of shared descent; of a shared history of suffering, defeat, and triumph; of shared religious belief, especially if persecuted; and of shared language, which is taken as the proof of a shared national mind and soul. A national language is the ultimate unifying narrative—so it is not surprising that states invest so much effort and resource in fixing a standard form of the language and trying to control the inevitable forces of change and break-up into local varieties, as well as ensuring that the children of immigrants, if not the immigrants themselves, take up the national language, rather than or along with the home language, as their vehicle of identity.

The brief and necessarily incomplete survey which follows illustrates various ways in which nation-states have been imagined, reimagined, or unimagined through the politics of language: in the multistate peninsula of Iberia, the multinational state of India, the stateless Iroquois nation, and the nation-states of Ireland and Israel.

Iberia

The Renaissance saw the transition from a Europe of divine dynasties to one of political nations. The new ideology of nationalism stimulated the creation of national languages—French, Italian, Spanish, German, English, Danish, and so forth, starting from the basis of some existing dialect but remaking it, principally on the model of Latin, so that it would

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have what it took to be perceived as truly a "language," a fit vehicle for divine knowledge (see Joseph, 1987, 2006b).

The great question was which of the patchwork of spoken dialects that characterized each corner of the European landmass would be the basis of the new "national language." In principle any of them could fulfill this function, but in reality some of these dialects were championed by politically or culturally powerful partisans, others not. The *Diálogo de la lengua* (1737/1965, first written 1535–6) by Juan de Valdés is typical of a genre of this period in which arguments are made asserting the advantages of one vernacular dialect over others as the basis for the nascent national language. Valdés ties the presence of linguistic diversity directly to the absence of political unity and autonomy within a state, and to the fact that peripheral areas within a state have at least as much in common with neighboring states as they do with the center and the other peripheral areas of their own state.

> Marcio: Since we take the basis of the Castilian language to be Latin, it remains for us to say how it came about that in Spain are spoken the other four types of languages that are now spoken there, namely Catalan, Valencian, Portuguese, and Basque.
>
> Valdés: Two things are usually the principal cause of diversity of languages in a province: one is that it is not entirely under one prince, king, or lord, whence it proceeds that there are as many differences of language as diversity of lords; the other is that, since something always links provinces bordering on one another, it comes to pass that each part of a province, taking something from the neighboring provinces, gradually becomes different from the others, not only in speech, but also in conversation and customs. Spain, as you know, has been under the rule of many lords . . . This diversity of lordships has I think in some manner caused the difference of languages, although each of them conforms more with the Castilian language than with any other; because, although each one of them has taken from its neighbors, as Catalonia has taken from France and Italy, and Valencia has taken from Catalonia, on the whole you see that principally they draw on Latin, which is, as I have said, the basis of the Castilian language . . . (Valdés, 1737/1965, pp. 47–9, my translation)

The belief that Castilian had undergone less outside influence than Catalan or Valencian made its "Spanishness" seem less diluted, and understandable by more Spaniards than any of the more "eccentric" vernaculars. Valdés goes on to eliminate Basque and Portuguese from the equation by polar opposed strategies: Basque, he says, is simply too far from the rest to be understood, while Portuguese is too close to Castilian (they were much more alike in Valdés' time than today).

Valdés takes the center, protected from outside influences by its geographical position, to define the essence of the national character and its linguistic manifestations. But centers are relative. A Portuguese national language was brought into being after Portugal became a separate kingdom from Galicia in 1139, in large part by focusing on and exaggerating such differences from Castilian as could be found. Galicia itself was taken over by the Castilian monarchy in 1486, yet Galician, closer linguistically to Portuguese than to Castilian, continues to play an important role in Galician identity and movements for the restoration of independence. It has not been quite so dramatically successful as Catalan in this regard, probably because Galicia lacks the economic power of Catalonia and its capital Barcelona. The Catalan language also enjoys the status of official language of an independent state, Andorra, as well as being co-official in Catalonia itself, the Balearics, and Valencia.

The status of the Catalan language and its role as the principal language of education have been crucial to the nation's claims for statehood in recent decades. Meanwhile, however, Valencians have been asserting their own independence from both Spain and Catalonia,

and, not surprisingly, pointing to the differences between Valencian and Catalan as evidence for their separate nationhood. For Basque separatists, the linguistic isolation of the Basque language from all those around it is, of course, of immeasurable importance.

India

The independence of India and Pakistan in 1947 was a watershed in the wrapping-up of the European overseas empires. There was historically little attempt to mythologize India as a nation-state, given its great linguistic, religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity from north to south, with no one people clearly forming a core of "real" Indians. It was Britain that unified the subcontinent, and when India took independent statehood, English was the only language that all educated Indians shared, and that had functioned in the modern administration of the country. As the ex-colonial language, however, it carried with it a symbolic value directly at odds with that of the nationalist ideal, without which the new state appeared doomed to fragment.

The movement to establish Hindi as the nation's official language "aroused the provincial nationalism of the non-Hindi language group; stirred deep regional, communal, and cultural divisions; and forced the reorganization of state boundaries to the accompaniment of vast civil violence running into tens of thousands of deaths" (Passin, 1968, p. 453). The passions that have given rise to this state of affairs are illustrated by the following quotations:

> There is not a day to be lost. The Hindi noose is fast tightening round our necks. We have to act before the last breath is stifled. . . .
> We have to carry on a vigorous, relentless, and countrywide propaganda for English. The message of English should be carried to every nook and corner of this land . . .
> Never give in, Never give in! Never, Never, Never, Never . . .
> The victory will be ours. (John, n.d., pp. 49–52)

The view of Mahatma Gandhi, while more pacific, was no less strongly held:

> To think that English can become our national language is a sign of weakness and betrays ignorance.
> Then which is the language which fulfills all the requirements to be the national standard?
> We shall have to admit that it is Hindi.
> How can any Indian really be averse to Hindustani? . . .
> Only that language which the people of a country will themselves adopt can become national. However virile the English language may be, it can never become the language of the masses of India. (Gandhi, 1956, pp. 4, 146)

The solution arrived at was to make English an "associate official" national language, a status just below that of Hindi, and to allow wide berth for the use of other Indian languages at the state and territorial level. Currently 22 languages have this "scheduled" status. It is a cumbersome solution, but the politics of India have been such that granting recognition to many constituent nations has been the only way of keeping them together within the state.

Ireland

The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland was established on the first day of the 19th century, January 1, 1801. Scotland and England had been joined by an Act of Union

in 1707, while Wales had merged into a single jurisdiction with England in the 16th century, the same period in which the 60-year-long Tudor (re)conquest of Ireland was undertaken. Great Irish estates and plantations were granted to English settlers in much the same way as in the southern American colonies.

Already at the end of the 19th century, Home Rule for Ireland became the great *cause célèbre* for center-left belief in the nation-state throughout the UK and beyond. The lack of concern for the population shown by English landowners during the Irish famine of 1740–41 became a national narrative giving the cause a moral foundation. In terms of national identity, religion was a significant factor, the majority of the Irish—especially the poor—being Roman Catholic. Linguistically, however, English was the dominant language. In order to further the nation-state cause, the Irish middle classes began to cultivate the Irish Gaelic which their ancestors had mostly given up (see Crowley, 2005). A series of Home Rule acts culminating in the partition of North and South in 1921 did not end the political cause, particularly among Irish Catholics in Northern Ireland, which remained part of the UK.

The ideology of Gaelic as the one true language of all Ireland—or rather, Éire—was strong enough for the Republic to introduce the language as a compulsory school subject, despite it having a small secular literature and no tradition of use in scientific or humanistic study. By the 1960s the popularity of Irish as a school subject was on the wane, as the dream of a Gaelic-speaking socialist nation-state went the way of other modern utopias. Still, the use of Gaelic names for key government bodies such as the Oireachtas (parliament), and posts such as the Taoiseach (prime minister), continues to fulfill a powerful identity function.

Iroquois

The Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) is a confederation of six (originally five) American Indian nations whose traditional lands make up most of the present state of New York. The confederation has a constitution, the Gayanashagowa (Great Law of Peace), which is recorded on a wampum (shell bead) belt that is apparently more than four centuries old, with the text itself representing an oral tradition that may go back a further four to six centuries (see Favor, 2003). These carefully preserved sacred belts were produced as evidence to French and British colonial officials, and later to the American government, of the six nations' right to inhabit their lands freely. As a constitution, they are what give the multinational Iroquois confederation the status of a quasi-state.

The document declares that it is only language that makes a nation: "The Great Creator has made us of the one blood and of the same soil he made us and as only different tongues constitute different nations he established different hunting grounds and territories and made boundary lines between them." Yet there seems not to have been an attempt to create an Iroquois language from the related Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and (later) Tuscarora dialects spoken by the people who made up the quasi-state. It is striking how much of the Gayanashagowa consists of texts to be recited at particular rituals, including funerals and the start of battles but also ritual meetings of the nations' councils. In the following excerpt from the constitution, nothing is said about the nations' linguistic differences.

> Should two sons of opposite sides of the council fire agree in a desire to hear the reciting of the laws of the Great Peace and so refresh their memories in the way ordained by the founder of the Confederacy, they shall notify Adodarho, [who], in conjunction with his cousin Lords, shall appoint one Lord who shall repeat the laws of the Great Peace . . .

> At the ceremony of the installation of Lords if there is only one expert speaker and singer of the law and the Pacification Hymn to stand at the council fire, then when this speaker and singer has finished addressing one side of the fire he shall go to the opposite side and reply to his own speech and song. He shall thus act for both sides of the fire until the entire ceremony has been completed.

This suggests that, at the time the text was composed, the five nations' languages were mutually comprehensible, even if recognized as different tongues. In later centuries, when linguistic change had widened the gap, the sacred status of the Gayanashagowa may have made it impossible to question whether the languages of the various nations might require reunifying. It would however be naive to suppose that, if a common Iroquois language had been created following processes similar to those which produced the European national languages, it would have made a great difference to the subsequent loss of Iroquois land and autonomy.

Israel

The state of Israel began as a concept long before it became a reality. In Europe in the second half of the 19th century, Zionism was a cultural and political movement, and it was then that the "revival" of the Hebrew language began with regular exchanges and columns in Central European Jewish newspapers. The Sykes–Picot agreement of 1916, which planned for breaking up the Ottoman Empire and putting the Middle East under the control of Britain and France, made the dream seem realizable. But only the revelation of the full scale of Nazi genocide in 1945 brought consensus over the moral imperative for the founding of a Jewish nation-state. Ironically, the ideology behind this was that same belief in the natural right of a nation to occupy its own homeland that had driven the Nazi genocide.

Those who came to settle in Israel were immediately confronted with their vast cultural differences, including the lack of a common language. The project of reviving Modern Hebrew now became a political necessity—but in fact the idea that the modern language is the ancient one revived is part of the narrative establishing the cultural-psychological existence of a Jewish nation and its right to occupy this particular territory. In fact the grammatical structure of Ivrit (modern spoken Hebrew), which linguists take to define the "real" nature of a language, is very different from that of the ancient tongue, reflecting a creolization of the modern language's substrata, including spoken Palestinian Arabic, Yiddish, Judeo-Spanish, and a range of Slavic languages (see Zuckermann, 2003). In addition, the myth grew that the revival was the work of one scholar, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, making what was a long and rather haphazard process appear rational and controlled. This gave Ivrit a claim to modernity, hence fitness to function in all spheres of life, including science, alongside the claims of its ancient authenticity.

Conclusion

The unanswerable question for now is whether national languages, together with the nations to which they are attached, represent a historical phase that is on a course of decline heading for eventual disappearance, or an invention that has proven too useful for human social organization to be given up. Pace Butler and Spivak (2010), it will be some time before analysts can assess the accuracy of the widespread belief that the restoration of globalization since the early 1990s is responsible for the reduction of loyalties to the state units fixed in the 19th and 20th centuries, in favor of regional or tribal loyalties. Considerable

evidence suggests that what has been happening should in fact be called "glocalization"—a term coined to denote the combination of globalization with the resurgence of local, subnational sites of belonging.

SEE ALSO: Cultural Identity; Language Policy and Planning: Overview; Language Problems as Constructs of Ideology; Language Rights in Language Policy and Planning; Nation; National Language and English in India; Role of Language and Place in Language Policy

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